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AUTHOR Brydges, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

This review identifies and categorizes 27 contemporary children's or young adult novels in which either the protagonist or one of the major characters is gifted. Books are classified into six categories: (1) books in which giftedness is described as an innate character of the protagonist, but this fact is not a dominating feature of the character or plot; (2) books in which the characters are who they are because they are gifted, but giftedness itself is not an issue; (3) books in which the protagonist or another important character is gifted and that giftedness is a source of some problem or conflict, but giftedness is not the central focus of the book; (4) books in which the perspective of those not recognized as gifted is offered; (5) books in which giftedness is exaggerated for the sake of humor; and (6) books which explicitly focus on giftedness. The list of books analyzed is attached. (DB)

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The Portrayal of Gifted Children in Children's Books

Barbara Brydges
The University of Calgary

The objective of this study was to ascertain: whether gifted children are often found in children's books; whether there are consistencies in the way that they are portrayed; and finally, whether these portrayals are realistic. The underlying assumption is that literature reflects society's views and values so that fictional portrayals are a reflection of contemporary attitudes.

There are also practical uses to be made of such literature. Stories provide a coherent view of experience, providing a quite different picture of giftedness than can be gleaned from academic texts or lists of "gifted characteristics". Gifted children reading books about other gifted kids will experience a fellow-feeling, and spark of recognition. They may be helped to understand themselves, or may feel less isolated or unusual. Books can be used for bibliotherapy; a form of counseling in which individuals are encouraged to read and discuss novels in which the characters are confronted with situations and problems similar to their own.

I identified and read twenty-seven contemporary children's or young adult novels in which either the protagonist or one of the major characters was described in terms which are normally recognized as gifted; i.e. possessing high intelligence, highly able in school, or talented in a particular area such as art, music, science etc. This is in no way a comprehensive or exhaustive list of all possible titles, but it is sufficient to allow of breaking them down into six categories, based on the degree of their focus on giftedness.

CATEGORY ONE - There are a number of books in which giftedness is clearly described as an innate characteristic of the protagonist, but this fact is in no way a dominating feature of the character or of the book's plot or theme. Books on the bibliography that fit into this category include those by Danziger, Poole, and Rodgers. In all of these the fact that the central character is gifted is neither "here-nor-there", nor would it be easy to determine any commonalities to these three characters that could be used to develop a portrait of gifted children.

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CATEGORY TWO - Books that fall into this category have characters who are clearly who and what they are because they are gifted, but giftedness is not an issue or concern. In some ways, these may be the most positive portrayals of all, because these are well-integrated, self-confident individuals, content to be themselves and comfortable in developing their abilities. This group includes the two books by Bruce Brooks and MacLachlan's The facts and fictions of Minna Pratt.

CATEGORY THREE - The third category are books in which the protagonist, or another important character, is gifted and that giftedness is a source of some problem or conflict, but giftedness is not the central focus of the book's plot or theme. Titles from the bibliography which fall into this category include the books by L'Engle, Mahy, Sweeney and Tolan. L'Engle's and Tolan's books are both narrated by older sisters, who

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describe the problems of their exceptionally gifted younger brothers in similar terms. Both boys have a deep interest in science, and no common interests with the other children in their grade one classes.

L'Engle describes Charles Wallace Murry's first day in grade one, when the teacher asks the students to each tell her something about themselves:

> Charles Wallace (`You should have known better!' Meg scolded him that night) stood and said, "What I'm interested in right now are the farandolae and the mitochondria".....
> "Now, Charles, suppose you stop making silly things up, and the next time I call on you, don't try to show off." (p. 15,16)

The result of his being so different is that he is beaten up daily by the other kids.

Doug, the little brother of Tolan's narrator has few friends of his own age. "None of the other kids could relate to his all-consuming interest in the Ordovician age, and the very idea of playing with matchbox cars or pretending to be the captain of a spaceship had always bored him silly". (Tolan, p. 16)

Nevertheless, these problems are secondary elements of these novels - L'Engle's novel dealing with themes of good and evil, and Tolan's with learning to accept differences and weaknesses in other people.

CATEGORY FOUR - Three of the books on the bibliography tell the story from the other side, from the perspective of those who see themselves as "put down" or abandoned because they are not labelled as gifted. These are the books by Cresswell, Pfeffer and Woodson.

Cresswell's Ordinary Jack, is a humorous English novel about young Jack, the only one of the Bagthorpe clan who doesn't have several extraordinary talents. With the help of a sympathetic Uncle, he sets out to convince his family he has psychic powers.

Ten-year-old Laurie, in Pfeffer's Dear Dad, Love Laurie, writes to her absent father about her anger over not being placed in the school's gifted program, while her friend is. Laurie schemes and connives to get herself admitted to the program, and in the end achieves her goal.

These books do not negatively portray gifted individuals, the problem clearly residing with those who are jealous, but the tendency of the reader is to be "on the side" of the protagonist.

CATEGORY FIVE - Two books on the bibliography, and several other series that are not included, are works in which giftedness is exaggerated for the sake of humour. Fitzgerald's Great Brain series is similar to other series, such as the Encyclopedia Brown or the old Tom Swift books, in which the intelligence of the young hero is such that he can solve any problem, although sometimes he's "too smart for his own good". Although stereotypical in nature, these are very positive portraits.

Roald Dahl's presentation of an impossibly gifted young child, in Matilda, has a more serious satirical intent. Matilda who has read all of the Great Books by the time she starts Primary School, has the misfortune to be born to completely insensitive and stupid parents, "so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything unusual about their daughter".(p. 10) As if her parents weren't bad enough, the headmistress of the school is a bullying abusive tyrant who hates children. Matilda uses her brains and abilities, including the ability to move objects at a distance, to get revenge on

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her parents and give the headmistress her comeuppance. It's all satire and exaggeration, however Dahl makes some serious points about how children's abilities and interests can be run right over by adults.

CATEGORY SIX - The final, and largest, category of books are those that explicitly focus in plot and/or theme on an issue that arises, at least in part, because the protagonist is gifted.

The perception that giftedness creates a difference, and distance, from others of the same age is expressed in a number of books. Krumgold's Henry Three begins with Henry begging another boy not to tell the other kids about his (Henry's) high I.Q., because he has found from experience that he won't have any friends if they find out. However, Henry comes to realize that everyone in the community is hiding who they really are, including his own corporate-executive-father, and he determines to be true to his real self. He opens up and shows his real abilities in school.

A similar growth into the courage to be himself comes to ten-year-old Jessie Aaron's in Paterson's moving novel Bridge to Terabithia. His growth is fostered by a close friendship with Leslie Burke, a friendship that frees Jessie to admit his own deep passion for art, and gives him a self-confidence that he is able to retain even when he loses both Leslie and their own private kingdom of Terabithia.

Getting to know others with similar interests, on a real and intimate level, is also the key to overcoming the isolation that comes with giftedness in Snyder's very appealing novel Libby on Wednesday.

Hermes' I Hate Being Gifted and Cooney's Among Friends are written for different age groups but have a very similar storyline. In both books, a girl is rejected by her two best friends because her abilities separate her from them. Hermes' protagonist is sixth grade KT whose problems begin when she's put into the school's LEAP class (Learning Enrichment Activity Program) and her two friends join forces with snooty Erica to form an exclusive club. KT finds the courage both to refuse to join the club and to stay in LEAP, and her friends return.

Cooney's heroine Jennie is a perfectionist who finds herself excluded by all her classmates because, in her junior year of high school, she surpasses everyone else in absolutely everything she does. Finally the pressures of ostracism and her own drive for perfection cause her to run away from town. When she returns, Cooney seems to believe that she is showing that Jennie has learned to be herself, but the message that comes through much more clearly is that Jennie brought is on herself by not thinking more about other people. I found this the most manipulative and problematic book on the bibliography.

The two most emotionally powerful books are Peck's Remembering the Good Times and ONeal's The Language of Goldfish. Both are about gifted adolescents for whom adolescence, and the whole prospect of growing-up, are very difficult. The pressures they feel are not external but internal. They are perfectionists, not so much in having to achieve, as in wanting the world to be a more perfect place. Both Carrie, in The Language of Goldfish, and Trav, in Remembering the Good Times, possess a high degree of emotional intensity. These are very believable portrayals of gifted individuals, personifying Dabrowski's and Piechowski's psychological theories about the "overexcitabilities" characteristic of giftedness.

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Carrie, artistically and mathematically gifted, feels like a puzzle piece that doesn't fit. The stress of becoming an adolescent causes her world to internally disintegrate into shards of colour. She is hospitalized and then begins daily therapy sessions, which help reconcile her to the changes in life. As she finally concludes: " I know why I got sick...for some people growing up is especially hard. For Moira it isn't. For me it is." (p. 176)

Trav Kirby, the bright sixteen year old in Remembering the Good Times, possesses great empathy and a strong sense of justice and morality. He worries intensely about world affairs and drives himself to keep his own internal schedule.

> After he'd gone one time, Kate said, "Trav's wound up too tight. He's in too big a hurry to grow up."
> Polly was collecting the cards to lay out a hand of solitaire. "He ain't in a hurry to grow up", she said. "He dreads it." (p. 33)

Trav doesn't grow up - he commits suicide.

One way for a bright kid, who sees the faults of the world, to survive is shown in Bruce Stone's book Been Clever Forever. By two days into his grade one year, Stephen Douglas' parents have been told their son is a "divergent thinker," in the first of an endless series of parent-teacher conferences, recorded in a "...personal school record, which in eleven years has come to rival in sheer bulk the collected case studies of Herr Sigmund Freud." (p. 5-6)

Stephen refuses to take "the system" seriously and although he describes himself in terms that relate entirely to his intellectual ability, he also pokes fun at "giftedness". He never does what is expected of him. When the other students, and the principal, try to make him their hero and leader in getting rid of an unpopular teacher, he begins to side with the teacher. This is a book in the tradition of Catch 22 or Catcher in the Rye, with some hilarious moments, although it is uneven in execution and begins to wear a little thin.

It can be seen that there is a wide diversity of portrayals of gifted children in children's books, but there are also some frequently recurring themes. In spite of the recurrence of certain problems associated with giftedness, it would be a mistake to conclude that overall children's literature provides a negative portrayal of the gifted. Firstly, the books in which giftedness is not a problem are numerous but they do not lend themselves to lengthy analysis by the very fact that they spend little time dwelling on the gifted nature of the characters. Secondly, in the books in which giftedness is shown as causing problems, the problems are often succinctly described in "quotable" paragraphs; whereas the resolutions, in which the protagonists' strengths and abilities to find solutions are revealed, are less easily summarized and characterized.

The books in which giftedness is a major focus differ widely in quality. The least successful are those in which giftedness is a plot device, such in Hermes' and Cooney's books. The most successful are the books which focus on character, such as Peck's and ONeal's, where it is clear that the author is giving us an individual story, rather than a portrait of a group.

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GIFTED CHILDREN IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Brooks, Bruce. Midnight hour encores. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.

---. The moves make the man. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

Cooney, Caroline B. Among friends. New York: Bantam Books, 1987.

Cresswell, Helen. Ordinary Jack. London: Penguin, 1977.

Dahl, Roald. Matilda. New York: Penguin, 1988.

Danziger, Paula. The cat ate my gymsuit. New York: Dell Publishing, 1974.

Fitzgerald, John D. The great brain. New York: Dell Publishing, 1967.

Hermes, Patricia. I hate being gifted. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990.

Krumgold, Joseph. Henry 3. New York: Atheneum, 1971.

L'Engle, Madeleine. A wind in the door. New York: Dell Publishing, 1973.

MacLachlan, Patricia. The facts and fictions of Minna Pratt. New York: Harper Trophy, 1988.

Mahy, Margaret. The catalogue of the Universe. New York: Atheneum, 1986.

Newton, Suzanne. Where are you when I need you? New York: Viking, 1991.

Oneal, Zibby. The language of goldfish. New York: Penguin, 1980.

Paterson, Katherine. Bridge to Terabithia. New York: Harper Trophy.

Peck, Richard. Remembering the good times. New York: Dell Publishing, 1985.

Peyton, K. M. The Beethoven medal. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Pfeffer, Susan Beth. Dear dad, love Laurie. New York: Scholastic, 1989.

Poole, Josephine. This is me speaking. London: Red Fox, 1990.

Rodgers, Mary. Freaky Friday. New York: Harper Trophy, 1972.

Snyder, Zilpha Keatley. Libby on Wednesday. New York: Dell Publishing, 1990.

Stone, Bruce. Bean claver forever. New York: Harper Keypoint, 1988.

Sweeney, Joyce. Face the dragon. New York: Delacorte Press, 1990.

Taylor, Cora. Julie. Saskatoon, Canada: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985.

Tolan, Stephanie. No safe harbors. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981.

Wolff, Virginia Euwer. The Mozart season. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991.

Woodson, Jacqueline. Last summer with Maizon. New York: Delacorte, 1990.

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